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ABSTRACT

Adding to prior literature on adults' and children's appraisals of stressors, this study examined relationships among children's negative cognitive errors regarding hypothetical negative divorce events, positive illusions about those same events, the actual divorce events, and children's post-divorce psychological adjustment. Subjects were 38 custodial mothers who had divorced and had not remarried, and children ages 8 to 12 years whose parents had divorced in the previous 24 months. The children, 19 girls and 19 boys, were participants in a preventive intervention program for children of divorced parents. Each child was interviewed at home while the mother completed questionnaires in a separate room. Children's scores on a scale of negative cognitive errors (catastrophizing, overgeneralizing, and personalizing) correlated significantly with self-reported symptoms of anxiety and self-esteem, and with maternal reports of behavior problems. Children's scores on a scale measuring positive illusions (high self-regard, illusion of personal control, and optimism for the future) correlated significantly with low degrees of self-reported aggression. The correlation between scores on the negative errors and positive illusions scales suggests that a child who endorses negative cognitive errors for diverse events may also endorse positive illusions, and vice versa. Some children may admit negative information into appraisals of themselves, the world, and the future, but in a way that they retain positive illusions as well. (Contains 15 references.) (MM)

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Appraisals of Negative Divorce Events and Children's Psychological Adjustment

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relations among negative cognitive errors regarding hypothetical negative divorce events, positive illusions about those same events, actual divorce events, and psychological adjustment in 38 8 to 12-year-old children whose parents had divorced within the previous two years. Children's scores on a scale of negative cognitive errors (catastrophizing, overgeneralizing, and personalizing) correlated significantly with self-reported symptoms of anxiety and self-esteem, and with maternal reports of behavior problems. Children's scores on a scale measuring positive illusions (high self-regard, illusion of personal control, and optimism for the future) correlated significantly with less self-reported aggression. When we controlled for the occurrence of actual divorce events, negative cognitive errors uniquely contributed to explaining maternal reports of children's behavior problems, and positive illusions uniquely contributed to explaining children's reports of aggression. There was no significant association between children's negative cognitive errors and positive illusions. Taken together, the results suggest that intervention programs that simultaneously target children's appraisal biases and the incidence of negative divorce-related events in their lives would benefit children of divorced parents.

BACKGROUND

Children's adjustment to divorce is partly determined by the specific divorce-related stressful events that they experience. Some of the stressors children of divorced parents commonly face include parental distress, parental arguments, criticism of one parent by the other, loss of time with each parent, and the missing of visits by the noncustodial parent (Sandler et al., 1986).

In order to understand the differential impact of divorce events on children and to design effective intervention programs, we need to go beyond considering the direct consequences of these events on children's adjustment. Rather, we need to assess which factors differentially facilitate a child's ability to adapt to frequent and undesirable divorce events (Felner et al., 1983). According to a stress and coping theoretical perspective, children's responses to stressful events may be influenced by their interpretations and appraisals of the events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Adults' biased appraisals of stressful events have been shown to be associated with depressive and other types of symptomatology.

By focusing on depression, researchers have emphasized how misperceptions of reality may be associated with mental health problems. However, there is a separate line of research with adults that suggest that mentally healthy people also distort reality, but in an unrealistically positive direction. Unfortunately, research documenting the link between positive illusions and mental health is sparse.

The present study, building on prior literature on adults' and children's appraisals of stressors, investigates the relations among positive illusions, negative cognitive errors, negative divorce events, and children's post-divorce adjustment. Negative cognitive errors were operationalized as negatively biased appraisals as described by Beck (1976; Beck et

al., 1979), and were measured using an adaptation of the measure developed by Leitenberg and his colleagues (1986). The assessment of positive illusions was based on Taylor and Brown's (1988) theory that mentally healthy adults hold unrealistically positive views of themselves, an exaggerated belief in their ability to control the environment, and an unrealistic optimism about their future. In this study we developed a measure of positive illusions for children which reflected these positive appraisals in response to divorce events.

METHOD

SUBJECTS

Subjects were 38 custodial nonremarried mothers and children ages 8 to 12 who had experienced parental divorce within the previous 24 months. The 19 girls and 19 boys were participants in a preventive intervention program for children of divorced parents, and were recruited by random sampling of petitions for marriage dissolution. Letters and follow-up phone calls describing the intervention program were used to recruit participants. In families where there was more than one children within the 8 to 12 year age range, one child was randomly selected to ensure independence of response.

The average time since the parents had divorced was 9.4 months (range 1 to 23 months). The average age of the children at the time of the interview was 10 years 1 month (range 8 years 3 months to 12 years 3 months). Mothers reported a median annual income of $25,000 for their families (Range: less than $5,000 to $45,000-$50,000). Legal custody arrangements were 66% maternal custody and 34% joint custody, and all children lived at least half time with their mother. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of the children were Caucasian, and 11% were Hispanic.

PROCEDURE

One child from each family was interviewed at home, during which time the mother completed questionnaires in a separate room. All interviews were conducted as pre-tests to evaluate the efficacy of the prevention program.

MEASURES

1. Children's Cognitions about Divorce Scale (CADS): Comprised of 10 short descriptions of hypothetical events (see example below) that were selected from a group of representative divorce-related events previously rated as frequent and moderately to highly stressful (Sandler et al., 1986). Each description of an event was followed by 3 to 4 statements that reflected two negative cognitive errors and one or two positive illusions. The scale reflecting **negative cognitive errors** was comprised of 12 statements reflecting catastrophizing, overgeneralizing, and personalizing. The scale of **positive illusions** was comprised of 13 statements reflecting high self-regard, the illusion of personal control, and optimism about the future.

2. Divorce Events: Children reported the occurrence of negative divorce events during the past month using a 35-item adaptation of the Divorce Events Schedule for Children (DESC, Sandler et al., 1986, 1991). Seven of these items were combined to create a parallel measure of the number of divorce events portrayed in the CADS that children actually experienced during the past month.

3. Measures of Children's Psychological Adjustment:

Child Reports

a. Children's Depression Inventory (Kovacs, 1981)

b. Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale (Reynolds & Richmond, 1978)

c. Aggression & Delinquency subscales of Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983)

d. General Self-Worth Scale of Harter's Perceived Competence Scale for Children (Harter, 1985)

Maternal Reports

e. Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. As you can see in Table 1, there were strong Pearson correlations among the 3 **negative error** subscales. Associations among the 3 **positive illusion** subscales were moderate. Because of the strength of these correlations, in subsequent analyses we used only the total negative and positive scales to control for alpha inflation. The correlation of -.06 between scores on the **negative errors** and **positive illusions** scales suggests that a child who endorses negative cognitive errors for divorce events also may endorse positive illusions, and vice versa. Some children may admit negative information into appraisals of themselves, the world, and the future, but in a way that they retain positive illusions as well.

2. T-tests were computed on the total **negative errors** and **positive illusions** scores by gender to determine whether there were any differences between girls and boys. As you can see on the bar graph, girls scored significantly higher on the **negative cognitive errors** scale than did boys. Since as in previous studies with children, girls reported significantly more symptoms of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (M's = 12.21, 15.42, and 17.89, respectively) than did boys (M's = 7.95, 8.76, and 21.05, respectively), it is possible that the family-related events depicted in our scale elicited early gender socialized responses to the "contagion of stress" in family roles that women seem to experience more than men (McGrath et al., 1990). There was no significant gender difference in children's scores on the **positive illusions** scale.

3. Correlations with the effects of gender partialled were computed between negative and positive appraisals, and the 5 measures of children's adjustment. As shown in Table 2, scores on the **negative errors** scale correlated significantly with anxiety, low self-esteem, and maternal reports of children's total behavior problems. The associations between scores on the scale of **negative cognitive errors** and self-reported symptoms of depression and of aggression nearly reached significance. Scores on the scale of **positive illusions** correlated significantly with less self-reported aggression, and nearly reached significance in predicting anxiety. That the present results are not due to a responder bias is suggested by the significant association between children's scores on the measure of negative cognitive errors and mothers' reports of their children's behavior problems. According to Haaga et al. (1991), the most stringent analyses of measures of cognitive biases relate cognitive to noncognitive symptoms measured by different methods.

4. We used hierarchical regression analyses with gender entered first, divorce events entered second, and appraisals entered last to assess the unique effects of negative errors and positive illusions in explaining symptomatology. As shown in Table 3, the unique amount of variance explained by **negative errors** was significant for mothers' reports of their child's behavior problems. The amount of unique variance explained by **positive illusions** was significant in predicting children's reports of aggression, and approached significance in predicting children's reports of anxiety. Since maladaptive social functioning and anxiety may be interrelated (Strauss et al., 1989), it may be more than a coincidence that **positive illusions** were associated with these two measures of symptomatology. If children's use of positive illusions decreases their emotional arousal, illusions also may serve to protect children from their aggressive impulses.

5. It is possible that the causal relation between appraisals and adjustment is in the opposite direction. Although we have inferred that appraisal biases predate children's symptomatology, tests of this onset hypothesis with children and adults have yielded mixed results. The next step for researchers is to measure children's negative and positive appraisals and symptomatology at multiple points in time. Such a design would allow us to determine the role of actual divorce and other life events in the development and maintenance of appraisal biases and of symptomatology. Together, the results suggest that intervention programs that simultaneously target children's appraisal biases and the incidence of negative divorce-related events in their lives would benefit children of divorced parents.

NEGATIVE COGNITIVE ERRORS

CATASTROPHIZING

ALL THE KIDS AT SCHOOL WILL LAUGH AT ME FOR HAVING TO WEAR THESE OLD CLOTHES.

OVERGENERALIZING

DAD WILL ALWAYS FORGET ABOUT WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO ME.

PERSONALIZING

IT'S MY FAULT THAT MY PARENTS ARE FIGHTING.

POSITIVE ILLUSIONS

HIGH SELF-REGARD

I KNOW MY MOM LOVES ME WHETHER OR NOT SHE CAN COME TO MY GAMES.

PERSONAL CONTROL

IF I CALL MY FATHER AND TELL HIM THAT I MISS HIM, THEN HE'LL COME TO SEE ME.

OPTIMISM ABOUT THE FUTURE

SOMEDAY MY PARENTS WON'T FIGHT ANYMORE.

CHILDREN'S COGNITIONS ABOUT DIVORCE SCALE

10 Hypothetical Events (2 of each):

Parental Distress
Parental Arguments
Criticism of One Parent By Other
Loss of Time With Each Parent
Noncustodial Father Misses Visits

Your mom complains to you that your father cannot be trusted.

1. *You think, "My parents won't always be so mad at each other." (Opt.)*

   This thought is:

   Almost exactly like I would think 1

   A lot like I would think 2

   Somewhat like I would think 3

   Only a little like I would think 4

   Not at all like I would think 5

2. *You think, "Everythink is ruined." (Cat.)*

   This thought is:

Table 1

SUBSCALE	2	3	4	5	6
NEGATIVE COGNITIVE ERRORS					
1. Catastrophizing	.76**	.60**	-.03	.12	.04
2. Overgeneralizing	--	.78**	-.16	.10	-.14
3. Personalizing		--	-.29+	.27+	-.07
POSITIVE ILLUSIONS					
4. High Self-Regard			--	.32+	.52**
5. Personal Control				--	.45*
6. Optimism					--

R (Neg.errors/Illusions) = -.06

+ P < .10. * P < .01. ** P < .001.

Table 2

Partial Correlation Coefficients Between Appraisal Biases and Child Symptomatology, Controlling for Gender

Symptomatology	Negative Errors	Positive Illusions
Depression	.27+	-.10
Anxiety	.28*	-.27+
Aggression	.25+	-.30*
Self-esteem	.35*	-.05
Total behavior problems, mother report	.29*	.14

Note. n = 38.

+p < .07 (one-tailed). *p < .05 (one-tailed).

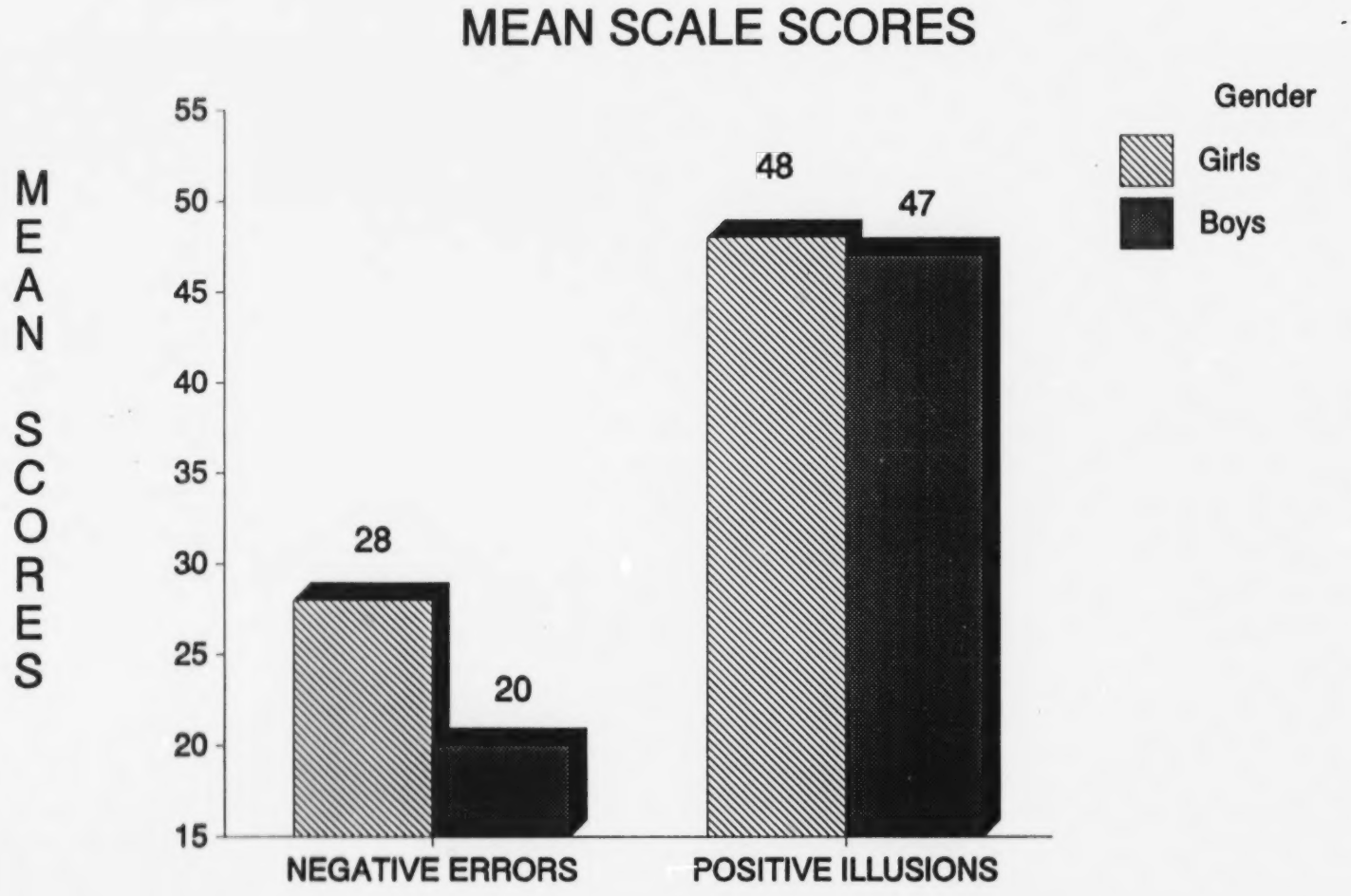
Table 3

Regression Analyses of Relation of Negative Errors and Positive Illusions with Child Symptomatology After Controlling for Number of Actual Divorce Events and Gender

	Negative Errors		Positive Illusions	
Symptomatology	Beta	R^2 change	Beta	R^2 change
Depression	.24	.04	-.07	.00
Anxiety	.14	.01	-.20	.04+
Aggression	.19	.02	-.27	.07*
Self-esteem	-.13	.01	-.10	.01
Total behavior problems, mother report	.42	.11*	.14	.02

Note. $n = 38$.

+$p < .08$ (one-tailed). *$p < .05$ (one-tailed).


MEAN SCALE SCORES
MEAN SCORES
55
50
45
40
35
30
25
20
15
28
20
48
47
NEGATIVE ERRORS
POSITIVE ILLUSIONS
Gender
Girls
Boys

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